

QUALIFICATION STANDARD FOR CHAPLAIN

1. REASON FOR ISSUE: This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook revises and updates the existing Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Qualification Standard for Chaplain, dated September 30, 1964, as follows:

- a. To delete the requirement that applicants be ordained clergy, in accordance with a 1993 court decision. However, candidates must still possess ecclesiastical endorsement from the official national endorsing body of the faith group or denomination.
- b. To change the nomenclature of the minimum education requirement from “Bachelor of Divinity to “Master of Divinity” in accordance with a change in nomenclature adopted by educational institutions in the early 1970’s.
- c. To clarify the requirements for “equivalent educational qualifications” in order to embrace the diverse religious traditions in the United States.
- d. To require two units of Clinical Pastoral Education for all positions involving clinical chaplaincy, in keeping with private-sector practice, and in recognition of the increasing specialization of clinical chaplaincy.
- e. To reduce the number of years of experience required at the entry level to 2.
- f. To clarify the quality of experience required for positions at GS-12 and above.
- g. To provide for appropriate selective rating factors.
- h. To include a requirement for English language competency.
- i. To incorporate current VA wording regarding physical requirements.
- j. To modify the provision for qualification waivers in order to protect the quality of the VA chaplain workforce.

NOTE: *All persons currently employed as permanent GS-060 VA Chaplains on the effective date of this standard are considered to have met all qualification requirements for the position held. They may be promoted, demoted, or reassigned within the GS-060 occupational series because they are considered to have met those qualification requirements. Any employee initially retained in this manner who leaves this job series loses this protected status and must meet the full requirements of this standard in effect at the time of reentry.*

2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS: This handbook contains an updated VA qualification standard for chaplains. Issues pertaining to certification requirements; clarification for minimum education requirements; and definition of levels of experience are addressed.

3. RELATED HANDBOOKS: None.

4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE: Customer Advisory and Consulting Group, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Resources Management (05A) is responsible for the content of this handbook.

5. RESCISSION: VHA Supplement to MP-5, Part I, Appendix 17A, change 6, dated September 30, 1964, is rescinded.

6. RECERTIFICATION: This document is scheduled for recertification on or before the last working day of March 2003.

S/ Thomas Garthwaite, M.D. for
Kenneth W. Kizer, M.D., M.P.H.
Under Secretary for Health

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QUALIFICATION STANDARD FOR CHAPLAIN

1. PURPOSE

This Handbook issues an updated Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) qualification standard for a Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Chaplain. **NOTE:** *The last standard was developed in 1964.* Over the years, academic requirements have changed; and a court decision has required deletion of the requirement for ordination.

2. AUTHORITY

The authority for this Handbook is Title 5 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Section 213.3102(a).

3. SCOPE

This Qualification Standard for Chaplain, GS-060,11-15 applies to all Chaplain positions in VA.

a. **Basic Requirements for all Grades.** Candidates must meet the following requirements:

(1) **Ecclesiastical Endorsement.** Candidates must have ecclesiastical endorsement, dated within the past 12 months, from the official national endorsing authority of their faith group or denomination. For the purpose of this standard, ecclesiastical endorsement is a written official statement, by the official national endorsing body of the faith group or denomination, certifying that the applicant is in good standing with the applicant's group or denomination; and stating that the individual is, in the opinion of the endorsing body, qualified to perform the full range of ministry required in the VA pluralistic setting.

(2) **Education.** Candidates must possess the Master of Divinity degree, normally based upon completion of 3 years of graduate study, or possess equivalent educational qualifications. Equivalent educational qualifications means possession of a bachelor's degree of at least 120 semester hours plus successful completion of 70 semester hours of graduate study which included or was supplemented by all of the following: 20 semester hours of pastoral ministry (examples: homiletics, preaching, ministry, pastoral counseling, supervised ministry and/or practice); 20 semester hours in any combination of theology, ethics, and philosophy of religion; 10 semester hours in religious history or world religions; and 20 semester hours in the study of sacred or religious writings, including the study of languages in which sacred or religious writings are written.

NOTE: *Education achieved prior to the issuance of this standard that included the post-baccalaureate Bachelor of Divinity or Bachelor of Sacred Theology Degrees is generally considered substitutable for the Master of Divinity Degree.*

(3) **Accreditation.** At the time the education was obtained, the entire institution, applicable

school within the institution, or the applicable curriculum must have been appropriately accredited by an accrediting organization recognized by the Secretary, United States (U.S.) Department of Education; or the specific courses taken must have been accepted for college-level credit by such an accredited institution. **NOTE:** *Institutions with acceptable accreditation are listed in the Directory of Postsecondary Institutions, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.*

(4) **Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE).** Candidates must have completed at least two units of CPE as defined by the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) or the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC) or have equivalent training. Equivalent training is not less than 800 hours of supervised ministry in a health-care setting, such as a hospital or nursing home, which incorporated both ministry formation and pastoral care skills development. Combinations of CPE and appropriate supervised ministry which total 800 hours meet this CPE requirement. The requirement for CPE may be waived for part time GS-11 positions, of not more than 416 hours per annum, which involve liturgical ministry with no participation in interdisciplinary health-care activities. Experience in such a position would not be creditable as “equivalent training” toward meeting the CPE requirement. Individuals for whom the CPE requirement is waived may not be reassigned or promoted to other chaplain positions until meeting the CPE requirement.

b. **Experience Requirements**

(1) **GS-11.** In addition to meeting the basic requirements, 2 years experience, following completion of the basic education described in subparagraph a(2) which has demonstrated both practical pastoral knowledge and skill, and the ability to minister in a pluralistic setting. Supervised or guided pastoral experience completed during graduate professional education may be credited for up to 1 of the 2 years of experience required for GS-11.

(2) **Substitution of Education for Experience.** Successful completion of a doctoral degree which is directly related to pastoral ministry, at an accredited college or university, may be substituted for 1 of the 2 years of required experience (unless the doctoral degree is being used to satisfy the minimum educational requirement).

(3) **GS-12.** In addition to meeting the requirements for GS-11, 1 year of progressively responsible specialized professional experience equivalent in complexity and responsibility to the GS-11 level. This experience must have demonstrated the following:

- (a) Ability to serve as consultant or expert to a multidisciplinary treatment team.
- (b) In-depth knowledge of related professional fields, particularly in the behavioral sciences.
- (c) Understanding of, and ability to respond to, the particular concerns and issues pertaining to treatment of veterans.
- (d) Knowledge of the structure, regulations, practices, and programs of health care delivery systems.

(e) Ability to interpret and apply a body of rules, regulations, policies, and procedures in professional practice.

(f) Ability to develop and maintain liaisons with a variety of outside organizations.

NOTE: *In addition to meeting the preceding requirements, candidates for supervisory positions must have demonstrated the ability to perform responsible administrative duties in a complex organization.*

(4) **GS-13 and above.** In addition to meeting the preceding requirements for GS-12, candidates must have 1 year of specialized professional experience equivalent in complexity and responsibility to the next lower grade. For supervisory positions, candidates must also have demonstrated ability to supervise a staff of chaplains from various faith groups.

c. **Specialized Program Areas.** For positions in specialized treatment programs, such as substance abuse programs, in addition to meeting the requirements of the particular grade, candidates must have demonstrated through their education and professional experience the necessary specialized knowledges, skills, and abilities to satisfactorily perform the duties of the position.

d. **Use of Selective Factors**

(1) Consider only qualified members of the specified faith group appropriate to the position to be filled.

(2) For positions organizationally titled: “Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisor,” which involve major responsibility for developing and coordinating an accredited CPE Program, candidates must, in addition to meeting the requirements for the particular grade, meet the designated selective factor of being certified as a Supervisor of CPE, or an Associate Supervisor of CPE, by either ACPE, or NACC.

e. **English Language Proficiency.** Applicants for this occupation must be proficient in basic written and spoken English.

f. **Physical Requirements.** Applicants must be physically and mentally able to efficiently perform the essential duties of the position without hazard to themselves or others. In most cases a specific physical condition or impairment will not automatically disqualify an applicant for appointment. The loss or impairment of a specific function may be compensated for by the satisfactory use of a prosthesis or mechanical aid. Reasonable accommodation must also be considered in determining an applicant’s ability to perform the duties of a position. Reasonable accommodation may include, but is not limited to: the use of assistive devices; job modification or restructuring; provision of readers and interpreters; or adjusted work schedules.

g. **Exceptions.** Notwithstanding the provisions of MP-5, Part I, Chapter 338, paragraphs 9b and 11d, the experience requirements of this standard may be modified or waived for temporary employment of chaplains at GS-11, when no fully qualified candidates are available, with the prior written approval of the Director, Chaplain Service. Candidates so appointed may not be placed in any other chaplain position until fully meeting the qualification requirements. Experience gained under such an appointment is creditable toward meeting the experience requirements of this standard.

***NOTE:** All persons currently employed as permanent GS-060 VA Chaplains on the effective date of this standard are considered to have met all qualification requirements for the position held. They may be promoted, demoted, or reassigned within the GS-060 occupational series because they are considered to have met those qualification requirements. Any employee initially retained in this manner who leaves this job series loses this protected status and must meet the full requirements of this standard in effect at the time of reentry.*

GUIDANCE ON USE OF THE VA QUALIFICATION STANDARD FOR CHAPLAIN GS-060-11/15

1. BACKGROUND: On March 2, 1998, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) issued a new qualification standard for the occupation of Chaplain GS-060-11/15. The new standard updates terminology; deletes the ordination requirement; adds a requirement for Clinical Pastoral Education, in keeping with private sector practice; reduces the minimum experience requirement; provides for selective factors; limits the conditions under which waivers of experience may be granted; and defines what education is considered equivalent to the Master of Divinity degree. The examining function for Chaplains in VA is performed by the Board of Excepted Service Examiners at the Headquarters Chaplain Service, in Hampton, VA. Field facilities were delegated certain personnel management authorities for chaplains. ***NOTE:*** *For additional guidance, refer to expired Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive 10-94-068, issued 08-05-94, and Human Resources Management Letter 05-95-5, issued March 22, 1995. It is recommended that this information be retained as reference material.*

2. OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION: Chaplains are endorsed by specific faith groups to meet the unique religious needs of patients of their faith group, while simultaneously providing a pastoral ministry to patients of all faith groups. Chaplains represent hundreds of different religions, with widely varying histories and beliefs. There is a particularly conspicuous variation in each religion's qualification requirements for clergy. Although chaplains' cultural diversity is vital in the pluralistic VA environment, equally important are the knowledges, skills, and abilities required to provide professional pastoral care in a modern health care setting. VA Chaplains, while remaining clergy, are also Federal employees with secular responsibilities. They must be able to assess the spiritual needs of patients of all faith groups, must know their religion-specific needs, and, most importantly, must understand how to provide patients the opportunity to express their religion while simultaneously preventing any imposition of religion, whether by chaplain, staff, or other patients. VA Chaplains interact with health care professionals of many different fields, to address the spiritual component of health and wellness in every patient-care setting. Chaplains deal both with staff and patients on sensitive issues of medical ethical decision-making, which are frequently difficult to distinguish from theological and cultural issues. Chaplains discuss complex and highly emotional issues with persons who are under unusual stress and who often have illnesses and/or disabilities which substantially impair their ability to understand and to communicate their desires. Last but not least, chaplains ensure that pastoral care does not "stand alone," but is well integrated into the healing and wellness model used by the facility.

3. EDUCATION: The Master of Divinity, the historical benchmark of educational preparation for chaplaincy, is a Christian degree. The educational equivalency standard must be used to assure that all applicants possess comparable educational preparation, without eliminating candidates, or faith groups, on the basis of purely religious or cultural differences.

a. The content of graduate courses frequently overlaps two or more of the four subject-matter categories of the educational equivalency standard. The semester hour credit for such courses may be divided between categories based on an analysis of course content. For example, a

course entitled "New Testament Theology" may be divided between theology and study of sacred writings. "Classics of the Jewish Tradition," or "Qur'anic Studies," may be divided between religious history and study of sacred writings.

b. Languages in which sacred writings are written are sometimes studied as an undergraduate. Undergraduate courses in appropriate languages may be counted towards the sacred writings or languages category, but may not be counted towards the 70 semester hour minimum graduate credit requirement.

c. The creditability of course work must be interpreted within the context of the applicant's own faith group. It may be necessary to determine, for example, whether particular writings are sacred to a particular group; or whether a language studied is one in which sacred writings of that faith group are/were written.

d. It is strongly recommended that Veterans Affairs Board of Excepted Service Examiners (BESE) at VHA Headquarters Chaplain Service be consulted on all questions of educational equivalency. BESE will obtain additional faith group-specific information from the Ecclesiastical Endorsing office of the faith group if necessary, and will make a final eligibility determination.

4. ACCREDITATION: The accreditation of educational institutions attended by applicants must be verified. Many educational institutions providing graduate education in theology, religion or divinity do not seek accreditation from secular accrediting bodies. There are some accrediting organizations which are not recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, it is not uncommon for clergy to complete some or all of their education overseas. Evaluation of education from non-accredited institutions will be in accordance with instructions in the OPM Qualifications Standards Handbook, page II-11. Some non-accredited institutions hold such stature in the educational community that their graduate course work is accepted by accredited institutions as the equivalent of their own. BESE keeps records of such institutions. The ultimate source of information is the U.S. Department of Education, Accreditation and State Liaison Division, at (202) 708-7417. Information on closed institutions may be obtained from them at (202) 708-7243.

5. CONTRACT AND FEE-BASIS UTILIZATIONS: Fee-basis and contract chaplains must meet all requirements of the chaplain qualification standard.